

Exploring the Effect of Study Abroad on Student Proactive Learning

Hiroko MUTOH

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper to examine how student proactive questioning, which relates to their proactive learning, is influenced by their study abroad experience. Proactive learning is one of the important educational issues in Japan. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) shifted the aim of the education from knowledge acquisition to fostering the abilities to learn proactively (MEXT 1996). The concept of *proactive learning* was also found in Key Competencies (OECD 2005, Rychen, Salganik 2001), the Basic Social Skills (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry 2006), and the Graduate Competencies (Central Council for Education 2008). As for proactive learning, students continuously learn through their own experiences and collaborations with other people. These learning experiences are not uniform nor limited by their own school experiences and the societies/cultures in which they belong. To study about student proactive learning, it is necessary to consider not only their recent learning experiences and personal characteristics, but also how the students have experienced in and outside of the classroom throughout their academic life.

To study the correlation between proactive learning and student experiences, this study focuses on student proactive questioning behavior in class and study abroad experiences. Muto et al. (1980) point out that asking questions is an important learning activity in which learners proactively engage with others and then acquire knowledge. However, one of the main dilemmas in education in Japan for many years is the issue that Japanese students don't ask questions proactively in class even though proactive learning has been promoted from elementary school through college (Mutoh 2019). On the other hand, the number of students who studied abroad in college has been increasing year-on-year over the past years (Figure 1). In 2017, there were 105,301 Japanese college students who studied abroad, which is 2.9 times more than in 2009 (36,302 students). If this trend of studying abroad continues to grow at the same rate, it will mean significant number of students in Japan will have study abroad experience. Regarding the classes abroad, Kariya (2012) mentioned that students ask questions actively in US college classes. If Japanese students experience such classes abroad where it is more common for students to ask questions proactively, these experiences may influence these study abroad Japanese

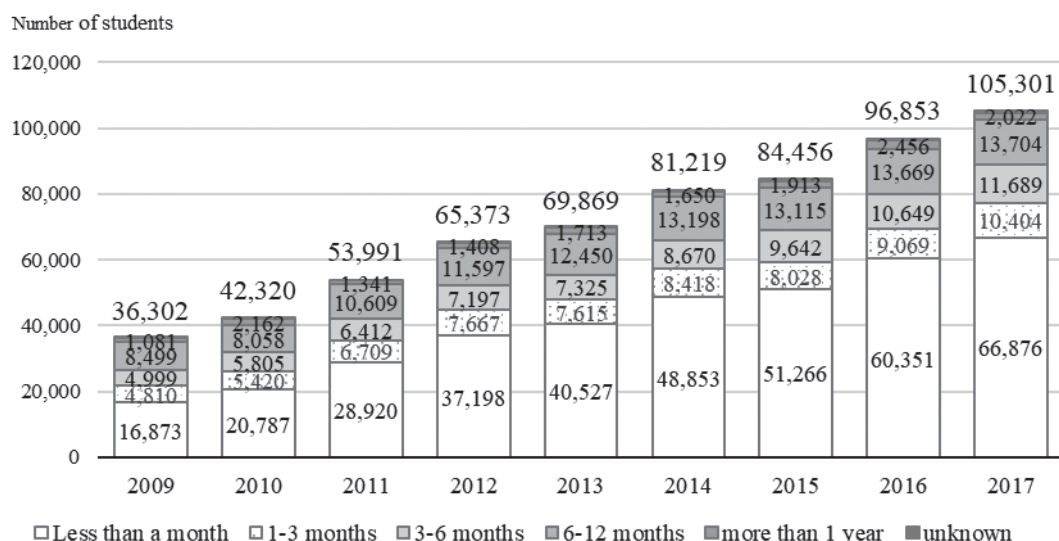


Figure 1 Number of Japanese college students who studied abroad
Created based upon data from MEXT (2019)

students to ask questions in the classroom. Because of the reasons above, this study focuses on how student proactive questioning, one of important learning activities relating proactive learning, is influenced by their study abroad experiences.

2. Literature Review

In the literature review, we will examine the previous researches on student proactive questioning behavior in class and study abroad experiences. Regarding Japanese student questioning in class, Mutoh (2019) pointed out that Japanese students are not having enough questioning experience from elementary school through high school based on interviews with Japanese college students; however, the study did not show the statistical results on the issue. Some practical studies were conducted to improve Japanese student proactive questioning by offering questioning experiences in class. Ikuta and Maruno (2002) reported that despite making elementary school children create questions in class, their questioning behavior did not increase. Similarly, Muto (1994) instructed college students to prepare before class as part of their homework and then have students write questions related to the lesson in class. However, Muto concluded that these exercises did not promote student proactive questioning. Also, Nomura and Maruno (2017) made college students write questions in class and reported that these activities seemed to deepen the content of the questions created by the students, but the effect disappeared just two months later. These practical studies suggest that having students make questions in class does not lead to the promotion of student proactive questioning in Japan.

Study abroad experiences were researched from several aspects: language acquisitions, global citizenship, cognitive development, among others (Levin, 2009), and some research showed a positive correlation between study abroad experiences and college student engagement in class. In the US, Kuh (2009) used “asked questions in class” as one of the benchmarks of active and collaborative learning in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Student questioning in class has been considered an essential learning activity. Using the data from NSSE, Gonyea (2008) reported that the experience of studying abroad increased the level of engagement in college. Zhao et al. (2005) presented that Asian international students were less engaged in class than American students and other ethnic international students in US colleges. In Japan, Yokota (2016) conducted a survey among 20- to 50-year-old Japanese who had study abroad experience. This study indicated that study abroad experience improved student proactiveness. These results suggest Japanese international students, as Asian international students, are less engaged in class compared with American students, yet Japanese student with study abroad experience did have an increase in their proactiveness in class in Japan.

These studies above indicated that practical studies in Japanese classes did not lead to the promotion of student proactive questioning (Ikuta, Maruno 2002; Muto 1994; Nomura, Maruno 2017); in contrast, it is presumed study abroad experience would promote Japanese student engagement and questioning. However, such research on the impact of study abroad experience on student proactive questioning is scarce. Also, the kinds of study abroad experiences (i.e., the academic year and duration) and why study abroad experiences promote Japanese student proactiveness even upon return to Japan have not been clarified.

3. Purpose of the Study

This study focuses on the *how* and *why* study abroad experience has an impact on the questioning behavior of Japanese students in class. For this purpose, this study compares the differences in the proactive questioning behavior of Japanese students who have studied abroad with those who have not. We also consider the timing - before college or during college - and duration - long-term or short-term - of the study abroad experience of the students. As a control group, we examined the level of proactive questioning of Japanese students who did not study abroad at elementary, junior-high, high schools and college. The students who have study abroad experiences were asked about their study abroad experience and any differences noted in their proactive questioning behavior in class after returning to their home country, Japan. The aim of this research was to answer the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: Does the level of proactive questioning of Japanese students who did not study abroad remain the same from elementary school through college?

RQ2: Is proactive questioning of Japanese students, who have studied abroad, affected by the timing of study abroad - before college or during college -, and by the duration - long-term or short-term?

RQ3: Why do Japanese students who studied abroad have an increase in their proactive questioning behavior in class even after returning to Japan?

To answer these research questions, this study used two methods: questionnaires and interviews.

4. Study 1: Questionnaire

A questionnaire survey was conducted to answer RQ 1 and RQ 2 above.

4.1 Method

The questionnaire survey was conducted at a four-year private university in Tokyo in 2017. The questionnaire participants were 399 Japanese undergraduates. There were 42% female and 58% male, ranging in age from 18 to 27 ($M = 20.05$, $SD = 1.37$). Of the 399 participants, 108 were freshmen, 79 were sophomores, 110 were juniors, and 102 seniors. The participants belonged to a variety of departments, such as education, literature, science, engineering, inter alia. Using the six-point Likert-scale, the questionnaire participants were asked about their proactive questioning behavior, one of NSSE's engagement benchmarks, each at elementary, junior-high, high schools and college. Also, participants were asked about their study abroad experiences as follows: 1) study abroad experience (yes or no); 2) the academic year when they studied abroad; 3) the duration; 4) the country name where they studied abroad; and 5) what they thought about student questioning behavior in their classes abroad. The collected numeric data were analyzed with multiple comparisons using IBM SPSS Statistics ver. 26.

4.2 Results

The participants were classified into five groups based on their study abroad experiences: 306 students who have no study abroad experience (Group N); 32 students with short-term study abroad before college (Group SB); 34 students with long-term study abroad before college (Group LB); 18 students with short-term study abroad during college (Group SA); and nine students with long-term study abroad during college (Group LA). In this study, "long-term" means more than five months. Participants gave scores ranging from one to six for their level of proactive questioning during elementary, junior-high, high schools and college.

The average scores of Group N during each school level were used to answer RQ 1 (does the level of proactive questioning of Japanese students who did not study abroad remain the same from elementary school through college?). The scores of Group N were 3.20 ($SD = 1.58$) in elementary school, 2.83 (SD

= 1.44) in junior high school, 2.50 ($SD = 1.35$) in high school, and 2.45 ($SD = 1.12$) in college. There were significant differences ($p < .001$) between elementary school and junior-high, and junior-high and high school using Bonferroni's multiple comparison (Figure 2). Based on the results, it was found that Japanese students who did not study abroad had a gradual decrease in their proactive questioning behavior from elementary school through high school and remained at a low-level during college.

Next, the scores between Group N and the other four groups in each school were compared using multiple comparison, Dunnett's Test, to answer RQ 2 (is proactive questioning of Japanese students, who have studied abroad, affected by the timing of study abroad - before college or during college -, and by the duration - long-term or short-term?). Dunnett's test was used to compare the mean scores from the four groups (i.e., Group SB, LB, SA, and LA) with one control group: Group N. Based on the results, significant differences ($p < .05$) were found between Group N ($M = 2.50$) and Group LB ($M = 3.12$) in high school; between Group N ($M = 2.45$) and Group SA ($M = 3.07$) in college; and between Group N ($M = 2.45$) and Group LA ($M = 3.47$) in college (Figure 3). The results show a positive effect in high school of long-term study abroad before college. However, this positive effect diminished during college. Also, both short-term and long-term study abroad experience during college increased student proactive questioning behavior upon return to college in Japan.

The question arises whether studying abroad actually means experiencing classes in which students ask questions proactively. This question was posed to those students who had study abroad experience.

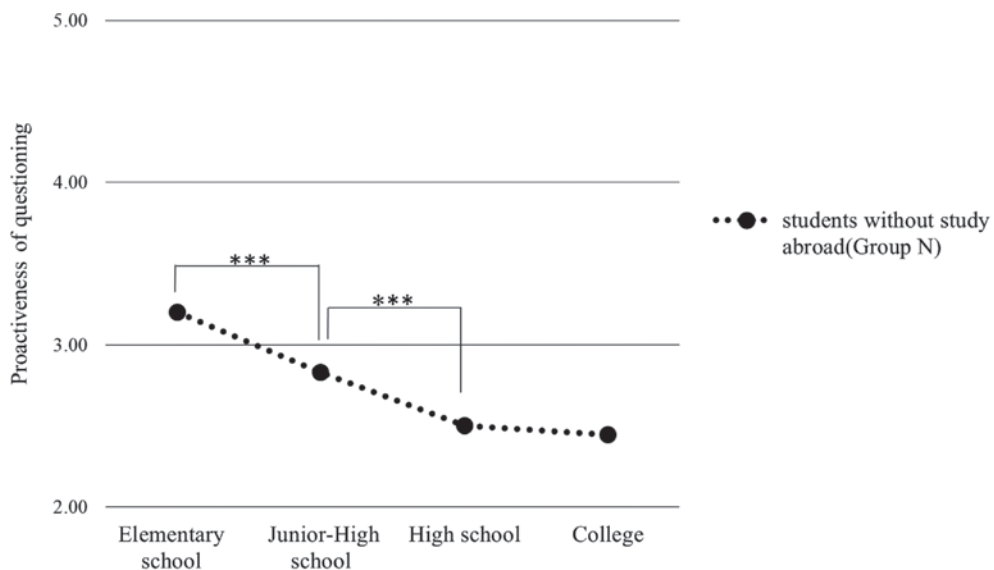


Figure 2 Comparing proactive questioning during each school levels (Group N)

*** $p < .001$

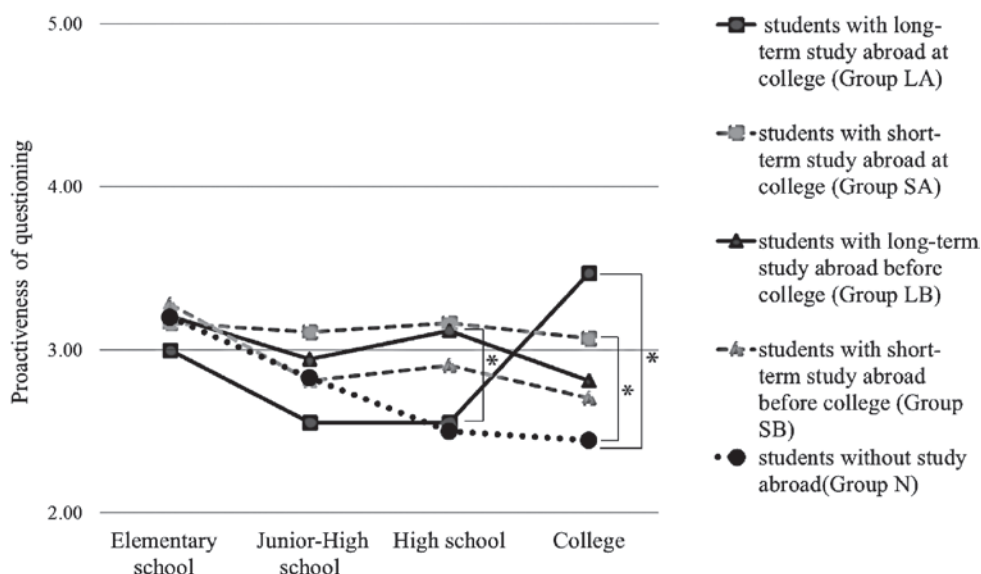


Figure 3 Comparing proactive questioning between Group N and other groups

* $p < .05$

85 out of 93 students with study abroad experience responded to the following questions: what they thought about student questioning behavior in their classes abroad. 82 of them answered that students in foreign classes asked questions actively. None of the participants said that asking questions in Japan was more active than other countries. The following are some examples from their descriptions in the questionnaire:

“Students asked questions at a moment they felt they didn’t understand something.” (Australia)

“I felt the differences. I didn’t feel they (foreign students) looked down on other students because of any strange remarks by students. There was a class atmosphere that facilitated asking questions; it was natural.” (US)

“They were asking a lot of questions. The class was conducted by student discussions.” (UK)

“In Japan, I felt like we should not speak out because the teacher should be the only one speaking in class. But in France, no one cares about it. As a matter of course, teachers respond to student questions, and light communication developed between them.” (France)

“Students asked questions spontaneously and made remarks actively. Students didn’t seem to worry about what other people thought.” (US)

“All students actively asked questions to teachers and other students.” (US)

“Everyone asked questions regardless of the difficulty of the content.” (Spain)

Based on these comments, there is reasonable evidence to conclude that Japanese students who studied abroad have experienced classes where students ask questions proactively.

5. Study 2: Interviews

Interviews were conducted to answer RQ 3 (why do Japanese students who studied abroad have an increase in their proactive questioning behavior in class even after returning to Japan?).

5.1 Method

Semi-structured interviews with seven college students who studied abroad and were among the questionnaire participants were conducted. They were asked about their study abroad experiences and their proactive questioning behavior after returning to Japan, among other topics.

5.2 Results

S6 and S7 have studied abroad before college. S6 was a so-called *returnee* student. S6 and S7 said that after returning to Japan, there wasn't a class atmosphere in which students could ask questions; they felt they had no opportunity to ask questions in classes at Japanese schools. Some of their comments are noted as follows:

"When I was in the US, it was easy to tell others what I thought - I liked this, I could agree with you and so forth in class. When I was in Japanese school, surely, I wasn't taught that I shouldn't say anything in class. On the contrary, teachers told us to speak our opinions actively, but I didn't talk so much because I felt there wasn't such an atmosphere in which students may talk freely." (S6: long-term before college)

"(Regarding proactive questioning behavior after returning to Japan) I didn't think that the high

Table 1 The interview participants who studied abroad

ID	duration	timing and area where they studied
S1	long-term	College: 10 months in US, 2 months in Germany
S2	long-term	College: 1 year in US
S3	long-term	College: 2 months in US, 6 months in US
S4	long-term	College: 6 months in UK
S5	short-term	College: 1 month in China, Taiwan, Singapore
S6	long-term	Elementary school: 4 and a half years in US High school: 2 and a half years in US
S7	short-term	High school: 1 month in UK

* "long-term" means more than five months.

school teaching style used very much active learning, so I think my thought about student questioning hasn't changed much." (S7: short-term before college)

Even if Japanese students experienced foreign classes where students ask questions actively, they still did not ask questions proactively after returning to Japan, because the atmosphere wasn't conducive to asking questions and/or the students didn't have the opportunities to ask questions in class, especially during their K-12 educational years. These students might not ask questions proactively because of the influence of Japanese "student quiet" K-12 classes after returning to Japan.

S1 to S5 studied abroad during college. From their narratives, it can be assumed that some students kept asking questions actively based on their study abroad experiences, and others eventually stop asking questions because they became accustomed to the Japanese class environment in which asking questions was not common. Some of their comments are noted below:

"It's usual that students ask questions in US classes, and I felt American students have the right to speak out in class. Also, there was an environment that facilitated asking questions. Because I experienced such an atmosphere in the US, I think my attitude about asking questions in class has positively changed even after returning to Japan." (S3: long-term at college)

"American classes were open to asking questions. Any questions would be OK. I felt that asking question is pretty common in US classes. After I came back to Japan, I'm attending classes in which American students also participate, and I feel like I'm influenced by them little by little." (S1: long-term at college)

"I felt like I wanted to speak out just after I returned to Japan, but I gradually became accustomed to Japanese classes and only spoke a little during class." (S2: long-term at college)

From the interviews, the students who studied abroad during college said that asking questions in the US was active and common; therefore they consciously asked questions actively in class even after returning to Japan. As they asked questions proactively just after returning to Japanese college, it is presumed "student quiet" atmosphere wasn't so strong in college classes comparing with K-12 classes. However, one of them said, as she got accustomed to Japanese classes, that she gradually became less engaged. It suggests some college students keep asking questions actively as if they were in classes abroad even in Japanese college classes; on the contrary, other students tend to decrease their proactive questioning by getting accustomed to Japanese classes. It is inferred that some Japanese study abroad participants in college took to asking questions proactively by referring back to their foreign classroom experience in which students asked questions actively and commonly.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the impact of study abroad experiences on proactive questioning of Japanese students by focusing on the academic period of the study abroad experience, either before or during college, and by the duration, either long-term or short-term. From this study, the following three findings, relating to RQ 1, 2 and 3, were obtained.

RQ1: Does the level of proactive questioning of Japanese students who did not study abroad remain the same from elementary school through college?

Japanese students who did not study abroad gradually decreased their proactive questioning behavior in class from elementary school to high school and remained at a low-level during college.

RQ2: Is proactive questioning of Japanese students, who have studied abroad, affected by the timing of study abroad - before college or during college -, and by the duration - long-term or short-term?

The long-term study abroad before college increased student proactive questioning behavior in high school. However, this positive effect diminished during college. It was also shown that both short-term and long-term study abroad experiences during college increased student proactive questioning behavior during college.

RQ 3: Why do Japanese students who studied abroad have an increase in their proactive questioning behavior in class even after returning to Japan?

It is inferred that some Japanese study abroad participants during college took to asking questions proactively in class after returning to Japan by referring to their classroom experiences abroad where students asked questions actively and commonly.

This research showed that study abroad during college increased Japanese student proactive questioning which generally took a downturn from elementary school to college if students did not study abroad. From interviews, the author can infer that study abroad experience increased the possibility that Japanese students would use more proactive questioning in Japanese classroom by referring to their foreign academic experiences in which student questioning was more active and common. These past experiences abroad became a reference or role model for these Japanese students to draw on while in college in Japan. Hyman (1960), who elaborated a concept of *reference groups*, mentioned that people model themselves not only on those who are near but on those who are far away as well. Considering Hyman's point, it can be presumed that Japanese study abroad participants acquired new reference

groups through their study abroad experience to model themselves on during college. However, the reasons why study abroad experience before colleges did not work as well as those during college are still unclear. The students, who studied abroad before college, might not ask questions proactively even though having foreign reference classes because of the Japanese “student quiet” K-12 classes after returning to Japan. To clarify the reasons, further studies are needed.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, previous research has indicated that study abroad experience increased class engagement of both American students and Asian/Japanese students in college. This paper also obtained similar results regarding Japanese students who studied abroad during college. Concerning students’ descriptions in Study 1, it is suggested that asking questions in US and other countries was more active than in Japan. And also, no significant differences about student proactive questioning were mentioned between US and other countries. Since it seems unreasonable to think that American students would experience foreign classes in which are more proactive questioning than how it is in the US, the reasons behind the impact of studying abroad on Japanese students would naturally be different from those of American students. Further comparative studies are needed to clarify the impact of study abroad experiences among students from different countries who have different school cultures.

This study indicated that Japanese students who have studied abroad for short-term and long-term during college tend to ask questions more actively even after returning to Japan. In the future, if the number of students who studied abroad continues to increase, it can be predicted that the number of students who actively ask questions in Japanese college classes would also increase. From the literature reviews, it was shown that some practical studies in Japan aimed at improving Japanese student proactive questioning did not produce positive results. However, this study suggests that proactive questioning by Japanese students in college classes can be improved through study abroad programs.

In this study, students were asked to evaluate their level of proactive questioning on a six-point scale. As Figure 3 shows, even students who studied abroad during college for long-term (Group LA) answered that their level of proactive questioning was only around 3.5, which is only in the middle of the six-point scale. Study abroad programs would improve Japanese student proactive questioning in class after returning to Japan, however, the positive effect would be limited.

This study focused on the relationship between proactive questioning and study abroad experiences based on academic year and duration. Further studies are needed to reveal the relationship between Japanese student proactive questioning and other factors, such as student classroom experiences and learning environments, for promoting Japanese student proactive learning in Japan.

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